



**U.S. Army Corps
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Walla Walla District
Public Affairs Office

News Release

News Release No. 00-32

Date:
July 14, 2000

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Corps partnering with Milton-Freewater Water Control District to improve Walla Walla River habitat

Walla Walla, Wash. - The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is partnering with the Milton-Freewater Water Control District to improve fish habitat on the Walla Walla River.

In the Walla Walla River Floodplain Restoration environmental report recently released, the Corps proposes an environmental project that will move flood control levees back, widening the river, and encouraging the development of vegetation along the river. Public comment is currently being solicited on the report.

"This creates a riparian zone that is beneficial to fish," said Chris Hyland, a project manager at the Corps' Walla Walla District headquarters. "It will also continue to provide the same level of flood control with proper maintenance."

The Milton-Freewater Water Control District is the sponsor for the project and is responsible for operation and maintenance of the Corps' levees in this area. Cooperating partners in the project include the Walla Walla Watershed Council, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Four areas to move the levee back were examined in the feasibility report, and the Corps is recommending action at three of the sites. More than 60 acres of flood plain would be added to the river. One site (two acres) of the project is within the Milton-Freewater city limits, according to Hyland.

The project would benefit Endangered Species Act-listed steelhead and bull trout. It would improve the quality of the habitat by increasing vegetation, creating shaded areas, encouraging the river to pool, and create more habitat by increasing the natural meandering of the river, creating more stream length.

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"Our primary concern is people and property, but we have a secondary responsibility to have fish habitat," said George Gillette, board chairman for the Milton-Freewater Water Control District. "The setback levees would widen some areas of the river, especially at the site by the Frazier Farmstead."

"With a more natural stream, it will open up the floodplain and will provide a more natural river environment at the two sites that are above Marie Dorian Park," Gillette said.

"It would open up an area of the river that has been channelized for miles, creating a more natural river, recharging the floodplain," said Brian Wolcott, coordinator for the Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council.

The total cost of the project would be more than \$2.6 million dollars. This includes the cost of the feasibility study (\$281,000) plus design costs.

The Corps' authority to modify the levees is in Section 1135 of the Water Resources Development Act of 1986, as amended. This authorizes a program of modifications to water resources projects constructed by the Corps for the improvement of the environment. Projects that address degradation of the quality of the environment caused by a Corps project may also be undertaken. Non-Federal sponsors are responsible for 25 percent of the project cost and usually 100 percent of the operation, maintenance, replacement and rehabilitation.

Construction on the project could begin as early as next summer, depending on congressional appropriations, Hyland said. For a copy of the report, contact Nora Staffan at (509) 527-7266. For additional information on the report, contact Hyland at (509) 527-7264. The public comment period on the draft document ends on July 22.

For more information on the Walla Walla District, visit the web site at www.nww.usace.army.mil.

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